

Three Top Winter Perch

By Bill Varney



Along the Pacific coast we have twenty-three species of surfperch with nineteen of those in California alone. My three favorite perch to catch at the beach are calico, barred and walleye surfperch. With a bit of preparation, luck and know-how you can spend the entire winter hunting these slabs in the surf.

Barred surfperch are one of the most common surf fish caught along the West coast. This perch is characterized by a set of brassy vertical bars, alternating with vertical spots. All outlined in light green stripes. Found from the tip of Baja Mexico to Canada these fish spend most of their time in shallow inter-tidal waters looking for food and a safe place to live. As with other perch, barred surfperch bear most of their young during the fall, winter and spring. They grow to roughly seventeen inches and about four pounds.

Walleye perch are found mainly south of Santa Barbara and in northern Baja California. They are easily distinguished from other surfperch because of their silver color and larger than average eyes. Blue commonly accents the top of their body with black tipped tail and ventral fins. Although they may be small in size, only reaching about fourteen inches, they are generally found in large schools and put up a vicious fight.



Barred Surfperch



Calico Surfperch



Walleye Surfperch

For all three perch, calico surfperch is the most unusual and certainly the hardest to locate. Calico look quite a bit like a barred surfperch with distinctive gold splotches on their sides which gives them a “calico” finish. They tend to be thicker or more robust than barred perch of the same size and when you hook one you will know it as they fight quite a bit harder. Calico surfperch grow to slightly smaller than barred surfperch with the current state record being one pound eight ounces. This might be considered a “mid-sized” calico as they have been caught (but not as a record) in the three pound range.



Combining the right tackle and rigging is important if you want to have luck fishing for perch. I like to use a nine-foot spinning rod with a four to twelve pound test line test rating and a lure or sinker rating of 5/8 ounce. Having a limber tip is important for hooking and fighting fish and using an ultra light rod allows me to move up and down the sand with ease. Check out Cousins rods for surf fishing and steelhead rods made by Shimano and Lamiglas.

Match your rod with a 2000 or 3000 series spinning reel loaded with fresh six-pound mono and you’re ready for the beach. I’ve been using the Penn Battle II 3000 series

spinning reel and was surprised how well it stands up against splashes of sandy salt water while providing a very smooth drag—exactly when I need it!

For presenting bait I use the Carolina rig. This is a simple rig made up of a 1/4th to 3/4th sliding sinker, 6mm red or orange bead, black swivel, eight to twenty inches of six-pound fluorocarbon leader and a hook. For hooks I like to use octopus style hooks for small baits and a sproat bait holder hook for longer baits like ghost shrimp or worms.

Perch are generally not picky eaters but they do like to forage on foods that occur seasonally along the beach. Sand crabs, worms, mussel, clams, ghost shrimp, Gulp! sandworms, grubs and hardbaits all work well to attract perch. But the true secret to catching the biggest perch is to use, when the time is right, sidewinder crabs.

“Sidewinder” or lined shore crabs are found in any marine environment where you find rocks and moving water. These are the crabs you see scurrying across the rocks and into a crevice as you make your way out onto the jetty. Considering sidewinders were used to catch two of the last three state perch records--it’s easy to see they work!



Catching sidewinders can be a bit tricky so here are some tips. I like to use three methods to catch crabs. First, find a harbor or jetty and approach the rocks while watching for crabs. Keep an eye on at least one crab and as you move closer follow it to the crevice it runs to hide in. Use a butter knife or screwdriver to pry it out and then place it in your bucket or bait belt. So that’s the hard way.

Another way to catch sidewinders is to attach a coffee can to twenty feet of string. Place hardware cloth inside the can and cover it with a bit of anchovy, mussel, cat food, etc. Walk out on the rocks and lower it down between the boulders. Come back in twenty minutes and pull up the can to catch your crabs.

But by far the easiest way for agility challenged fishermen like myself is to find areas where rocks are about the size of a shoebox. Go here at low tide and just roll over the rocks and viola, there they are, ripe and fast moving for the picking. For protection, be sure to wear gloves when working near rocks as they many times have broken glass around them and the barnacles that collect on the bottom of rocks are extremely sharp. Lastly, let's not forget to mention the agony of a crab claw pinch. So watch out!

Hooking sidewinders crabs is easy. Lined shore crabs have a distinct egg flap on their underside. The flap is found near their backside and may be a half round or triangle shape. Using a #2 octopus hook (Gamakatsu split shot/drop shot, Owner mosquito or Ultra Point Mustad) insert the hook into the egg flap and all the way through the body. Your hook and barb will now be exposed and provide a great hookset.

And here's the most important tip about using sidewinders: Time of year is very important. Surfperch search for shore crabs in the winter months from November through April. So they work best during times where the water is it's coldest. Another important tip is to remember that most surf fish don't nibble bait. They actually inhale their food, crush it in their throat and then spit it out and eat the pieces. So as soon as you feel a pull or nibble reel down, lift your rod and set the hook. If not, the hook that was just in their mouth is now floating away as they eat the pieces of crushed bait around it.

Although surfperch are everywhere along the coast many of the biggest fish call rock structure like jetties and reefs their home. In summer you can look just about everywhere for perch but when winter comes the biggest fish are always near structure. Look for areas where rock meets sand like jetties or groups of rocks just offshore. Fish your bait here near the rock/sand edge. Downsize your sinker and shorten your leader as this will help reduce your snags. If your bait moves away from the rocks reel in and recast being sure to fish right on the sand/rock edge.



Another fantastic spot for finding huge perch is near or around rocks formations just offshore. Look for these rocks where the beach has not be dredged and is still in its

natural condition. All along the coast you will find these areas (Pt. Mugu to Malibu, Palos Verdes, Newport to Dana Pt., Solano Beach, to just name a few). Walk the beach and find rocks that you can cast to off shore. Most of the time the best rocks are those that are partially above the waterline. Cast your Carolina rig in front of these rocks and into the eddy circulation that churns up food and sand. Reel down and hold on cause this is where the big ones live!

As with any other fish in the sea proper management is important to keeping surfperch healthy. Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research estimates that as many as one million surfperch are caught each year. So in order to keep the perch biomass healthy we recommend that you release pregnant females immediately back into the ocean.